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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a rationale which rejects misinformation, assumptions, and biases as bases for decision making on the use of i.t.a. in teaching reading and writing to primary school children. A discussion is provided which questions the reality of professionalism in teacher-administrator populations as well as the reality of a concern for the child. A further discussion of strengths of i.t.a. programs as compared with typical similar traditional orthography (T.O.) programs demonstrates that T.O. constrains; such factors as reactive inhibition and feature characteristics of symbols are realities not accounted for in T.O. programs rather than any weakness in the author's capabilities. Rejection of the notion that traditional orthography is optimal for reading-writing purposes is supported. (Author/TO)

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A RATIONALE FOR USING i.t.a.

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While casting about for a title for my presentation, several topics engaged my interest. It appeared to me that a reading audience might be interested in such topics as

"The truth about dyslexia: once and for all," or "The Silent e speaks up," or "Diphthongs and other Chinese vegetables," or even "Everything you wanted to know about i.t.a. but were afraid to ask."

It appears that this latter topic might come closest to our subject for today based on what Dr. Downing has already said. As I listened, and I'm sure you recognized, rather than taking only a con position, often he took a pro position by indirection. The question for me might very well be what else is there left to say?

At the outset it should be said that Dr. Downing has offered one possible disadvantage of the use of i.t.a. in that the weakness of students in terms of progress might be more apparent to his parents, but he offered nothing to support his inclusion of weaknesses of teachers and schools in his first "factual disadvantages". His second "factual disadvantage" refers to grouping practices which might have been offered as support for an argument against the prevailing educational philosophy which has trained teachers to think in terms of three groups and other negative things, but this appears more to be an argument against those teachers and schools where inordinate pressure to achieve by certain points is the rule. I refer to the characteristic of some of the

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Junior School's Heads in Britain to assume that reading is something only taught in the Infant Schools, that "when a child comes to Junior School he knows how to read; that this is not something we teach", and the attitude among some second grade teachers in America of "can't be bothered". This attitude is most typically seen in any T.O. circumstance where the second grade teacher criticizes the first grade teacher as not having taught her class to read.

In neither case were persuasive arguments provided for the non-use of i.t.a.; rather, excellent arguments were presented to demand a revision of teacher and head attitudes and thinking in T.O. schools--remembering, of course, that all school years after the initial i.t.a. period are T.O. schools.

In passing, Dr. Downing referred to so called salesman claims that i.t.a. is a first grade program, or in England, an infant school program. While clearly and wisely pointing out that slower learners are often not ready for transition either at the end of grade one or the end of the infant school, he neglected to emphasize that experience on either continent has shown that the prupose of i.t.a., a reading alphabet, is clearly met for the majority of children in the U. S. in less than three fourths of a year. A claim in the U. S. that a given program in i.t.a. for the average child is a first grade program is therefore not only correct but might further be said to be poor salesmanship since such a claim doesn't describe the many average children who begin reading T. O. as early as Xmas of the first year on their own; doesn't describe the advantages for either the bright or the slow, etc.

However, Dr. Downing spent most of his time arguing not against i.t.a. but rather offering information on prevailing attitudes toward i.t.a. some of which were significant, others less so. What might better have been done was an analysis of how such attitudes were generated and might be changed: why so much fiction about i.t.a. exists in our professional texts; to whom the fictions on i.t.a. can be traced, or why our reading experts make statements about i.t.a. reflecting either a wholesale lack of scholarship or less than minor study in such areas as learning, transfer effects, reactive inhibition, conservation, decentration, etc.; and absolutely no knowledge of the content or design of existing materials.

To argue that attitudes about i.t.a. is an argument against the use of i.t.a. is not at all helpful to an understanding of the strengths and weakness of the alphabet and its usages.

While it is interesting to note that Nilson wrote that i.t.a. "has been adopted as the official beginning alphabet in British schools" and describe this as an outrageous claim, it appears equally outrageous, if not more so, to have two reading "experts" mount convention podiums and state some 5 years ago that "England has dropped i.t.a. and the U. S. will follow directly." What Dr. Downing has done, in arguing that i.t.a. promoters exaggerate panacea kinds of claims, when he uses such a reference, is not to provide evidence that i.t.a. promoters have made any panacea claims, but rather he provides a little evidence about the extent of distortions of information in the reading field, the questionable competency of editors who accept manuscripts without checking validity of statements, etc. Rather than providing any information

on false advertising claims for i.t.a, which presumably led to reading specialist and other educators having disgust for i.t.a., we can be led to believe that Nilson somehow was related to published i.t.a. materials and that he is guilty of false advertising claims. Of the some 80 people who can be identified as having some such relationships, I'm not aware that he is one. George Reimer, Author of How they Murdered the Second R, on the other hand, quotes Betts, Sheldon, Spache, Durrel many others, all of whom have made disparaging remarks about i.t.a in the years 1962-1965, when i.t.a. research was becoming available and usage expanding, and identifies their ties to T.O. basal materials directly. Such statements might have been identified as the basis for some of the prevelent attitudes and their biases exposed. However, little that was said by Dr. Downing was, as I read the manuscript, a simple Con position. Among others, one very positive statement on the adequacy of the Alphabet does emerge. Some of you may remember that in response to an article by Zeitz in 1964 that i.t.a. should be modified, I took the position that such changes were, at that time, unwarranted. My basis was realistic in that no evidence existed to indicate that Pitman's i.t.a. was in need of modification--Certainly our experience in Bethlehem did not suggest this at that time. At a later time, Downing suggested some changes and quoted me as being the only person opposed to a revision of i.t.a.

Since then my students and I have studied this question and, in comparative studies with the A G S Alphabet, Distar, WES, and two others were unable to find evidence that another alphabetic form was better or that tinkering with Pitman's i.t.a. could produce appreciable

improvement. While it is pleasant to have confirmatary vindication for my earlier position by Downing and his colleagues that modifications of i.t.a. would serve no useful purpose, it is just such minor controversy, answerable truly only in research, that has generated the attitude of confusion and misinformation and waiting for a new alphabet which Dr. Downing identifies as existing.

I do not mean to imply that another alphabetic form might not be more suitable for spelling reform purposes. I merely report that we apparently agree that no useful modification of i.t.a. has been generated for the purposes i.t.a. was designed: initial teaching of reading.

While rejecting much of what was described as irrelevent to our purpose here, let me recast the second of Dr. Downing's arguments. By law, in all of the states I've been able to study thusfar, it is clear that education in the schools exist for the benefit of children. While this seems an obvious fact, American educational practitioners have not acted generally as if this were so. Rather, it would appear that that which is convenient for the adult has largely been the paramount guiding force instead of the child's development, his needs and his interests. This matter of convenience has been recognized as an insidious and pervading characteristic of our society. We know, for example, that from the standpoint of diet, 5 small meals a day are more desireable to promote bodily health and well-being than the three square meals a day we generally follow; but what a nuisance three meals a day are, let alone five or six for the mother who prepares them! Thus, three meals, three times a day at times convenient to adults becomes the rule.

Elementary school buildings are most often built, not for children surely, else the door handles would be at child height. Curriculum is dictated by the adult-written books that school systems have purchased, not by the development of children. Forgetting adult needs, assumptions and conveniences, and examining the average child's behavior as he imitates and culls from his environment, we note that often he indicates literacy hunger at three or four, not five, six or eight, and when the child is hungry, he should be fed. How can we refuse to feed his literacy hunger at the earliest point in school? Furthermore, how can we deny the parent the support he needs in providing the child with literacy skills prior to formal schooling? No valid arguments support our present behavior except those based on assumption and convenience.

Program structure must be based on the child's motivation on entering school, else we lose the advantage of the strongest force for effecting learning. Rather than assuming a posture that the "experts'" assumptions are correct, programs based on pedagogically and psychologically sound learning theory as these relate to children, a concern for prevention of failure, early intervention strategies, a mix of materials and approaches, should characterize our stance rather than one of acceptance of convenience.

In the days before accountability became a by-word, an attitude of concern of a different sort was being discerned in some school districts. Those districts had courageous administrative and educational practitioners who sought solutions to the seemingly never ending numbers of children who were not succeeding in reading, who questioned their own professional skills, who sought different ways to break the circle of failure, ego-damage, withdrawal, and negative attitude development

characteristics of learning to read and write in T.O. It was in districts such as these that Pitman's i.t.a. was seen as an opportunity to provide a rational basis for meeting the child where he was in his development, for providing a psychologically sound concrete to abstract sequence of learning activity, for providing a pedogogically correct simple to complex sequence of learning activity, for allowing the child to develop decoding skills easily and well unencumbered by reactive inhibition, to develop writing skills commensurate with his oral language development, his dialect, his syntax, and expressive of his experiences.

Practitioners who were interested in the child's development recognized that it was possible, using Pitman's i.t.a., to set in motion a wholesale revision of the curriculum, to establish a basis for independent approaches to learning and to provide a basis for continuing examination of strengths and elimination of weaknesses in methodology and grouping practices.

While the attitude of acceptance of convenience for program and procedure is true of some school personnel, the vast majority of these can be grouped with the small initial band who broke away from traditions, and traditional orthography as self-limiting. Since T.O. has been demonstrated as being a significant and serious handicap to the learner, and a major source of frustration to teachers in understanding where and why the child is having difficulty, no teacher or administrator can afford any longer in this day of accountability to use the best tool available for understanding the process of acquisition of reading skill, for identification of learning difficulties, or bringing about release from the lock-step prison of antique and irrelevant practices. To avoid

being fired for incompetence (witness the California court decision that ruled in favor of the parents in their suit against the school district, its teachers, and the state on a failure to teach their son to read), to avoid being ruled against for lack of offering student's due process (witness the number of states which have provided information to students on their rights and privileges),to avoid being publicly castigated and/or sued for malpractice (witness certification procedures which demand demonstration of performance competency), an administrator, far from trying to hide his school's and teachers'inadequacies, must have a clear view of such shortcomings and he can obtain that view best by the use of i.t.a. Rather than making him or his teachers uncomfortable, the use of i.t.a. allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to study and correct deficiencies hidden by the complexity of T. O.

The advantages of i.t.a. are not simply that it permits the child to learn to read easily and well.

Research here and abroad indicates that children:

1. advance more rapidly in reading and writing experience; achieve significantly superior reading skill at an earlier time; read more widely; and write more prolifically, more extensively, and with a higher degree of proficiency, than their T. O. counterparts and have no difficulty in making a reading transition to T. O. materials when they are allowed to develop sufficient confidence and efficiency.

2. develop very high spelling skill in i.t.a. farily early. The transition to spelling T. O. in the two years subsequent to initial reading is relatively easy when directed instruction and guidance in spelling are given; and the achievement in spelling on standardized tests and in creative writing is significantly better.

3. show a lack of the inhibitions in writing which are commonly

found early in the first year, and his expressiveness continues into the second and third years. Significant accomplishments are found in these children's creative writing in terms of the number of running-words and the number of polysylabic words used and, in relation to some published series, originality.

When, however, an analysis of subsidiary characteristics is made, we note that there is

1. a marked reduction, to the point almost of elimination, in typical b-d and other letter confusions suggesting that the design of Pitman's i.t.a. characters contain additional discriminative features which are perceptually significant in the learning process. Where no modification of the character is made (n or u), intervention strategy to compensate was successful in adding discriminative features through verbal means.

2. We have observed that the use of i.t.a. in a published series does not demand that a particular structure be used for the reading-writing program. No rule of prohibition or inhibition was discovered in the use of i.t.a. as the introductory medium to the complex notational system: T.O. Thus an author's program could be based on his philosophy of educating the child, on assumptions concerning the way children learn best, or on studies of learning and research in reading and writing.

The construction of a reading program which utilizes i.t.a. to a maximum advantage therefore may be limited by a publisher's economic needs or an author's philosophical views, but i.t.a. places no constraint on either. While the vocabulary and interest content of a reading

program is not limited by i.t.a., the word analysis program is always a reflection of the structure of the orthography based on i.t.a. but, again, no particular organization is demanded.

When an author chooses to use a look-say discovery approach to word recognition, he should expect that the limitations of the discovery approach, probably as an effect of the pupils lack of development of conservation, will produce less skill than his materials might have if he chose a didactic phonic approach. But he cannot assume an inherent weakness of i.t.a. since i.t.a. is only an alphabet which is modified by eight rules into an orthography. It is his lack of understanding of learning theory, etc. which has produced the effect, not i.t.a. .

When an author chooses to use language experience elements which encourages and programs written expression by the child almost from the first day of school, he can expect a somewhat lesser reading skill development than obtainable if writing is discouraged, but he can also expect a significant out-pouring of written expression which has a long-lasting effect on the child's ability to express himself confidently and well. If he marries the language experience approach with deliberate interventions from the traditional to promote self-reliance and self directed expression, he can expect a long-lasting effect on the child's ability to approach such tasks with originality.

3. While the above are important to an examination of strengths and weaknesses, the effects of an i.t.a. beginning are more importantly studied on longitudinal bases. In three such studies, (Bethlehem, Bloomfield and Livingston) the replicated finding that

a. A 75 to 80% reduction in the need for remedial reading post - i.t.a. as compared to T. O. counterparts is a major, significant,

educational benefit for a school district - - in terms of benefit to the child who has not had to suffer failure and ego-damage, and in terms of economic benefit when reorientation and use of staff released from wasteful and negligbly effective remedial work is possible.

b. Further findings that a reduction in failure rate by more than 60% over a six year period or that remedial reading needs in an i.t.a. taught population were largely in terms of comprehension not decoding, more than suggests, it shrieks out loud, that i.t.a. has such decided advantages that one can only nod in agreement with Warburton and Southgate (i.t.a.: an independent evaluation) who indicated that "the best way to learn to read in T. O. is to learn to read in i.t.a."

Weaknesses of i.t.a. usage, in contrast with the strengths of i.t.a. itself, are legion. Dr. Downing has hinted at some of these, but each of those that can be enumerated reflect instructional inadequacy, philosopical bias, etc. and are not a reflection of inadequacy of i.t.a. For example, the child who, having an i.t.a. beginning, has not suffered ego-damage, who has gained confidence in his ability to master the complex process of learning to read, who has not been inhibited in writing what he can say or think, and who is released early to an independent learning approach, becomes a confident child, fearless in his attack on reading and writing. He becomes a child strongly independent of the teacher and what's more, he knows it. For teachers who need a child's dependency on her, such a child is a difficult one to deal with. While we'd all agree developing confident, independent learners is an outcome of any school situation and thus is a strength of i.t.a.'s usage, at the same time because he wants to do it himself,

such a learner causes teachers who want to feed, instruct or tell, much difficulty. That kind of child wants to do the telling, finding out, researching, reading and even dares to ask why he must do things for which he has no need.

Based on all of the above, i.t.a. as an alphabet appears without peer. As a concept, utilized in education, it has demonstrated the horribly damaging weakness of T.O., has permitted us to see how bad traditional orthography is for a child and the illiterate of any age. We can only conclude at this stage, that except for a few linguistic scholars like Chomsky, traditional orthography is omptimally bad and should be completely replaced.

In case you mistake me, I <u>am</u> calling for a spelling reform, and, until that day, the use of Pitman's i.t.a. for teaching reading and writing to all illiterates, child or adult. The two should not be confused. i.t.a. is an alphabet which when given an orthography produces a reformation of spelling for initial teaching purposes. A spelling reform could start with a new alphabet but doesn't require one. A spelling refrom is permanent through the grades and in all print. i.t.a. is a transitional medium for use in gaining skill in reading and writing our miserably spelled but marvelously rich and graceful language.